

# WATER LINES

NEWS FROM THE WATER RESOURCES DIVISION  
OF THE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND CONSERVATION

## Governor's Upper Yellowstone River Task Force concludes project – CHICO CONFERENCE SUMMARY

By: Liz Galli-Noble, Task Force Coordinator

The *Governor's Conference for the Upper Yellowstone River* was hosted by the Governor's Office, Governor's Upper Yellowstone River Task Force, and Park Conservation District. It was held at Chico Hot Springs Resort in Paradise Valley from October 20 to 22, 2003. A total of 138 individuals attended the three-day conference. The event brought together many project partners, both local and national, and helped ensure that the task force's recommendations and scientific findings were articulated to the public and governmental agencies.

The conference had multiple purposes: (1) present the task force's 43 river management recommendations and explain how they were developed; (2) review research investigation findings and integrated results; (3) discuss, analyze, and learn from the policy processes developed and applied by the task force; and (4) initiate a dialogue about long-term management in the upper Yellowstone River watershed for local, state, and federal entities.

Timely dissemination of relevant information intelligible to the public has been an important aspect of the Upper Yellowstone River Project and the development of river management recommendations. This final project conference at Chico proved to be an excellent venue for the task force to share its final recommendations. Governor Judy Martz and several of her staff attended. The Governor and John Bailey, chair of the task force, delivered positive and thoughtful opening speeches during the banquet on October 20. This set the stage for the conference; the upbeat, informative atmosphere of the entire conference encouraged communication amongst the diverse groups attending.

The upper Yellowstone River study area was defined for the task force in November 1997 in Governor Marc Racicot's Executive Order No. 19-97 as "that reach of river (including its tributaries), beginning at the Yellowstone Park boundary and extending downstream to the bridge

crossing at Springdale," Montana. Flanked by the Crazy, Bridger, Absaroka, and Gallatin mountain ranges and Yellowstone National Park, approximately 85 miles of the Yellowstone River flow within this 2,930- square-mile basin. Some 15,000 people live in Park County, and the vast majority of them will be directly or indirectly affected by the task force's management recommendations addressed at the conference.

The 43 recommendations developed by the task force address a variety of issues facing the river and its users – including bank stabilization, bridge replacement, financial incentives for conservation, fisheries monitoring and protection, future science and monitoring, stakeholder group development, permitting programs and regulatory decisions, and noxious weed monitoring and eradication. For more information regarding the recommendations see the task force website at: <http://www.upperyellowstonerivertaskforce.org/>

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# Montana's Drought of Fits and Starts

By: Jesse Aber, DNRC

Montana is off to a good start for the new water year with a mountain snowpack that ranges from average to above average. According to "Daily Mountain Precipitation Update" of the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), much of the state, as summarized by the Snow Survey for 15 major river basins, is on track with the historical average, as measured at the high elevation SNOTEL automated sites. A "water year" runs from October 1 to September 30 of the following year.

As of December 29, 2003, NRCS indicates that the snow water content of the Missouri headwaters basin was almost 100 percent, the upper Yellowstone River basin was about 90 percent, and the Smith-Judith-Musselshell basins were at 107 percent of normal for snow water content. The Sun-Teton-Marias basins were about 90 percent, a pleasant surprise after 2002, when they ended the snow season at 75 percent, and the St. Mary-Milk river basins ranked at about 90 percent of the 1971-2000 average. West of the Continental Divide, the Kootenai and lower Clark Fork river basins were at 105 percent and the Bitterroot was at 115 percent of average for snow water content.

Contrast this with December at this time in 2002, when the Missouri River headwaters basin was 55 percent of the 1971-2000 average for snow water content, the upper Yellowstone 67 percent, the Sun-Teton-Marias 32 percent, the lower Clark Fork 42 percent, and the

Bitterroot at 53 percent. The upper Missouri and the upper Yellowstone languished in the low numbers on through January and early February, but a series of snowfall events allowed these basins to finish the season in the average range, as did the major basins west of the Continental Divide.

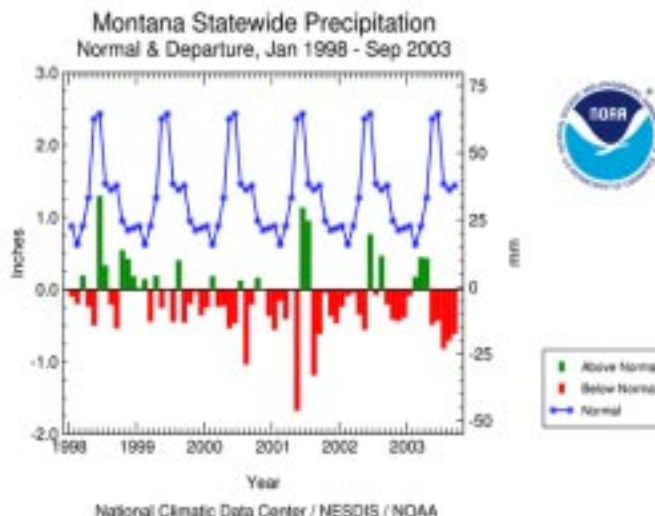
However, unseasonably warm weather in May caused the mountain snowpack to come roaring out weeks early, compressing the high streamflow runoff into a shorter than normal period and limiting the window of opportunity for irrigation diversion for water users without access to stored water. The abbreviated duration of the mountain snowpack runoff period would have implications for surface water supplies for the following four or more months.

There is also some good news about precipitation at valley elevations from the National Weather Service (NWS) posted on its Great Falls Internet site at: [http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/Greatfalls/drought\\_semi.pdf](http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/Greatfalls/drought_semi.pdf)

Kalispell was 91 percent of average for water year precipitation received (October – November), and Billings, another dry spot for 2003, was 84 percent of average for the same period. However, some locations continue to languish. For instance, for the first two months of the new water year, Dillon was ranked the 4<sup>th</sup> driest of 64 years of record at 19 percent, and Great Falls had the 6<sup>th</sup> driest start of 112 years of record at 30 percent. According to NWS, September was the 32<sup>nd</sup> driest September of the past 109 years for the state as a whole, and the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive month of much below average precipitation.

As much as I want to put water year 2002 – 2003 behind us, if we back up to mid-summer, it becomes readily apparent where things turned sour on us for 2003. Our apparent climb out of a four-year statewide drought came to a halt like solar clockwork on June 21, the longest day of the year, when daily high temperatures started to climb. By July 8, when I was taking my canoe off the Smith River, flows were less than 100 cubic feet per second and dropping, and the mercury was edging toward the century mark.

NWS reports that for the month of May 2003, Helena had 2 days over 90 degrees, June had 3 days, July had 20 days, August had 17 days, and September had one day over 90 degrees, for a total of 43 days with a daily high temperature over 90 degrees. Havre had 45 days with a daily high of over 90 degrees for the same period of May through September. In fact, preliminary data from the NWS Great Falls



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Office reveal that Glasgow, Havre, and Helena each had 9 days of daily high temperatures exceeding 100 degrees, Great Falls had 8 days, Missoula and Billings had 5 days, and the folks of Miles City endured 20 days of daily high temperatures over 100 degrees!

According to the National Climate Data Center (NCDC), the period of July through September 2003 was the driest such period, statewide, since 1895! The months of July and August were each ranked the 2nd warmest of the 109-year record, and the June, July, and August 2003 period was the 5<sup>th</sup> driest of the 109-year record for that three-month period. NCDC has ranked the period of June through November 2003 as the 10<sup>th</sup> driest statewide for the 109-year record.

Contrast this with the period of October 1, 2001 to September 30, 2002, when Montana's water year ranked as the 63<sup>rd</sup> warmest and 24<sup>th</sup> driest over 107 years. On September 19, 2002, NWS reported to the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee that, statewide, average temperatures for the period of March through August 2002 ranked the 9th coolest for that six-month period since 1895. Temperature was the big story of the summer of 2002, and good news it was.

This year, winter wheat provided one of the few bright spots in agriculture, with yields in the range of 40 to over 50 bushels per acre. In contrast, spring wheat was caught by extreme heat and lack of moisture during development, resulting in yields of from 5 to 15 bushels per acre and significant abandonment. Without record heat during our longest days, spring wheat yields may have been a different story in 2003, not to mention hay production; high demand for municipal and irrigation water from reservoirs,

aquifers and streams; rangeland conditions; and wildfires.

For all of the heat that the people, crops, and resources of Montana endured, the NWS Crop Year Precipitation (April through September) Map is mostly yellow and green, indicating 60 to 115 percent of average, with some 40 to 60 percent areas in the south central, northwest, and southwest climate divisions. About one-quarter of the state finished the crop year in the 85 to 115 percent of average range for precipitation received. However, I contend that the big drought story for 2003, as in 2002, was temperature, not precipitation.

If we look at agricultural statistics, water supply numbers, soil moisture figures, and groundwater levels, Montana is in worse shape at the end of the 2003 water year than it was at the close of the 2002 water year. The Palmer Hydrological Drought Index (PHDI) for Montana, statewide, for the period of 1999 to 2003 indicates a dry spell rivaled in severity and duration only by the period of 1935 to 1938, when considering the period of record, 1900 to 2003, for the PHDI. See: <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/research/2003/sep/st024dv00pcp200309.html>

Normal precipitation in the grain-growing regions of the state this fall helped winter wheat get off to a good start, but spotty November precipitation with windy and cold conditions put a halt to further development. As of the end of November, 89 percent of winter wheat had emerged with only 27 percent rated as good, compared with last year at the same time with 59 percent good, according to the Montana Agricultural Statistics Service's November 30 "Crop-Weather Report."

NRCS Snow Survey records indicate that, for the period of 1961 to 1985, the seasonal distribution of mountain snowpack should be at 40 percent of the total annual accumulation mark by the last week of December and at the 50 percent mark by January 10. With current snow water content in the normal range of 90 to 110 percent of average nearly statewide, we are on track for a normal water supply for spring runoff!

According to the Climate Prediction Center, the current 90-day precipitation outlook through February calls for a slightly above average probability that the western edge of the state will receive above average precipitation, with the remainder of the state receiving average precipitation for the period. There is a slightly above average probability that temperatures will be above average over the course of the 90 days along the eastern edge of the state, the remainder of the state being average.

Of course, as we look ahead, we can never rule out the wild card of Montana's inherently wide climate variability. For example, north central Montana saw a record-breaking hot spell this summer and on June 7, 2002, a 100-year rainfall event, both in little more than a year and in the midst of what were forecast to be periods of normal temperatures and precipitation. But the precipitation we have received in the mountains and at valley locations thus far is encouraging.

In summary, recovery from a prolonged cycle of drought is much like the descent from normal conditions into drought. It wavers along in fits and starts. The difference is that the trend line moves gradually upward over time with a net change that reflects improvement, rather than further deterioration of water supply and moisture conditions.



## Nevada Creek Dam Rehabilitation Phase II Nearing Completion

By: Jim Domino, DNRC

The second phase of the Nevada Creek Dam Rehabilitation Project is nearing completion. Phase II involves the construction of a new spillway. The project is being completed by Johnson-Wilson Construction, Inc. from Helena, Montana.

All but one of the new spillway floor slabs have been poured, and the new walls are being placed. The stilling basin excavation is completed, and preparations are underway for the installation of riprap. The onset of cold weather has necessitated the use of tents and blankets for temperature control and protection from the

weather. The concrete work was completed in late November, with full project completion in January 2004. John Sanders and Jim Beck have been sharing duties as the on-site Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) representatives. John Sanders serves as the project manager.

The Nevada Creek Dam is located in Powell County, approximately 9 miles southeast of Helmville. The dam is owned by the DNRC and managed by DNRC's State Water Projects Bureau. The Nevada Creek Water Users Association operates the dam. The

reservoir has a storage capacity of 11,152 acre-feet at the spillway crest and is used primarily for agricultural irrigation. The reservoir is also used for limited water-based recreation, primarily fishing. The dam is classified as high hazard under the Montana Dam Safety Act guidelines, which means that dam failure could result in loss of life.

The dam, constructed in 1938 by the State Water Conservation Board, is a compacted earthfill structure with an upstream cutoff trench located on Nevada Creek. Nevada Creek is a tributary to the Blackfoot River. The dam has a concrete spillway chute on the left abutment. The controlled low-level outlet consists of a 60-inch reinforced concrete arch conduit controlled by a 54-inch butterfly valve.

A study conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1981 found that the dam has inadequate spillway capacity, with the spillway showing serious deterioration. The dam was classified as unsafe and in need of repair in the 1981 inspection report by the Corps of Engineers. The rehabilitation began in 2002 with the Phase I extension of the outlet conduit, placement of a new terminal outlet structure and installation of seepage drains. Completion of Phase II will bring the dam into full compliance with all current safety standards.



PHOTO BY DNRC STAFF

Nevada Creek Dam

# State Launches Initiative to Rehabilitate the St. Mary Facilities

By: Paul Azevedo, DNRC

On Tuesday, November 18, approximately 230 water users, public officials, and concerned citizens from northcentral Montana attended a meeting in Havre convened by Lt. Governor Karl Ohs to discuss rehabilitation of the St. Mary Facilities of the Milk River Project. Often called the “Lifeline of the Hi-Line,” the St. Mary Facilities control the trans-basin diversion of water from the St. Mary River to the North Fork of the Milk River. The purpose of the meeting was twofold: (1) raise public awareness about the urgent need to rehabilitate the aging system, and (2) begin to establish a process through which representatives from the State of Montana, federal government, Tribal governments, and Milk River basin water users can work on a comprehensive strategy to secure the needed congressional authorization and funding to rehabilitate the St. Mary Facilities.

Built, owned, and operated by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), the St. Mary Facilities consist of a storage dam (Sherburne Dam), diversion dam, headgate, 29 miles of canal, two sets of steel siphons, and five concrete drop structures. The system is located entirely on the Blackfeet Reservation in Glacier County.

The St. Mary Facilities have been in operation for over 85 years with only minor repairs and improvements since

original construction. Most of the structures have exceeded their design life and are in need of major repairs or replacement. The capacity of the system has dropped from a design capacity of 850 cubic feet per second (cfs) to approximately 670 cfs. The steel siphons



*The two 3,200-foot-long, 90-inch-diameter siphons that convey water across the St. Mary River are designed to handle 850 cfs.*

have slope stability problems and leaks, and the concrete in the drop structures is severely deteriorating. Landslides along the canal and the condition of the structures make the canal unreliable as a water source. Failure of one of the drop structures in 2002 resulted in the canal being turned off for approximately two months during the irrigation season.

The economy of the Hi-Line region has been built around the stable wa-

ter supply provided by the St. Mary Facilities. Without the needed rehabilitation the aging system may soon suffer a catastrophic failure. Loss of the St. Mary Facilities would have a disastrous economic impact on the Milk River Basin and the state of Montana in general.

## The St. Mary Facilities

The Milk River Project was authorized by Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock on March 4, 1903, as one of the first irrigation projects initiated by the new Reclamation Service (now USBR) under the Reclamation Act of 1902. The objective for the project was to provide a stable source of water for irrigation of the lower Milk River valley. Early settlers had learned that natural flows in the Milk River did not provide a reliable water source for irrigation in the downstream end of

the watershed. Consequently, a plan to divert water from the St. Mary River to augment flows in the Milk River was a key component of the Milk River Project. Settlers moved to the Milk River valley on the promise of a stable supply of water for irrigation.

The St. Mary Facilities begin at Sherburne Reservoir on the eastern edge of Glacier National Park. Water stored in Sherburne Reservoir is released to Swiftcurrent Creek and di-

PHOTO BY MIKE DAILEY

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verted to Lower St. Mary Lake via the Swiftcurrent Dike. From Lower St. Mary Lake, water flows into the St. Mary River and is diverted into the St. Mary Canal via the St. Mary Diversion Dam located 0.75 miles downstream. The canal follows the east side of the St. Mary River and crosses the river 9.5 miles below the diversion through two 90-inch, riveted steel-plate siphons 3,600 feet in length. Eight miles below the St. Mary crossing, a second set of riveted steel-plate siphons, 78 inches in diameter and 1,405 feet long, conveys the water across Hall's Coulee. A series of five concrete drops at the lower end of the 29-mile canal provide a total fall of 214 feet to the point where the water is discharged into the North Fork of the Milk River. On average, 150,000 acre-feet of water per year are transferred over the Hudson Bay/Gulf of Mexico divide to the North Fork of the Milk River. The water then flows for 216 miles through Alberta, Canada, before returning to Montana, where it is stored in Fresno Reservoir 14 miles west of Havre. Releases from Fresno Reservoir provide irrigation and municipal water along the Milk River to its mouth near Nashua, 200 miles to the east.

## **Importance of the St. Mary Facilities to the Milk River Basin**

The St. Mary Facilities are the keystone to large-scale irrigated agriculture in the Milk River basin. The system provides water to irrigate over 110,000 acres on approximately 660 farms within the Bureau of Reclamation's Milk River Project. Together, these farms produce approximately 8.3 percent of all cattle and calves, 7.8 percent of all irrigated hay, and 8.2 percent of all irrigated alfalfa produced in Montana.

Although the St. Mary Facilities were originally built to provide irrigation water, the beneficiaries extend far beyond irrigated agriculture. The Milk River provides municipal water to approximately 14,000 people in the communities of Havre, Chinook, and Harlem. In addition, two rural water systems are supplied from Fresno Reservoir. Beneficiaries also include fisheries, recreation, tourism, water quality, and wildlife.

During irrigation season (May through September) in a year of normal flow, approximately 70 percent of the Milk River flow near Havre originates from the St. Mary River basin. In dry years, the imported water may make up to 90 percent of the Milk River flows past Havre. During the drought of 2001, 95 percent of the available water in the Milk River at Havre originated in the St. Mary River basin!

As authorized in 1903, the Milk River Project was a single-use irrigation project. At the time, irrigated agriculture was seen as the primary beneficiary of project construction. As a result, over the last 85 years, 100 percent of the cost to operate and maintain project infrastructure, including the St. Mary Facilities, has been borne by irrigators within the project through an annual assessment on their irrigated lands. However, according to USBR, ongoing costs of maintaining the aging system, including the St. Mary Facilities, exceed the irrigators' operation and maintenance payments. As a result, the St. Mary Facilities have deteriorated to the point that replacement and major rehabilitation are necessary. Since 1999, the State of Montana has awarded over \$400,000 in grants, and the eight irrigation districts within the Milk River Project have contributed \$200,000 for crucial repairs, merely to keep the system operating in some capacity.

According to an appraisal level study completed by USBR in 2003, it will cost approximately \$90 million to rehabilitate the St. Mary Facilities back to the original design capacity of 850 cfs. USBR says that it does not have the money. According to reclamation law, 100 percent of the cost must be borne primarily by the authorized beneficiaries of the water. In the case of the St. Mary Facilities, the cost would be borne primarily by the Milk River Project irrigators and to a lesser extent by the municipalities of Havre, Chinook, and Harlem. However, before any work can begin, a feasibility study on the project must be prepared. The feasibility study must include a final engineering report, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance documentation, and a cultural resources survey.

At the November 18 meeting in Havre, representatives from DNRC unveiled a draft action plan for pursuing rehabilitation of the St. Mary Facilities. The State's approach is based on the belief that a partnership between basin water users (irrigation, municipal, business, recreation, fisheries, etc.), State government, Tribal government, and the federal government is the most promising course of action for pursuing rehabilitation of the system. The State's proposed approach includes forming a St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group charged with developing a workable solution for rehabilitating the aging system as soon as possible. The working group will be chaired by Lt. Governor Ohs and will be composed of local water users, concerned citizens, and state, Tribal, and federal officials with an interest in rehabilitating the system. Staffing and technical support will be provided by DNRC. DNRC will also establish an Inter-Agency Rehabilitation Team to coordinate the efforts of the various state agencies that will

*St Mary . . . continued on page 8*

## Flathead Basin Commission

The newest member of the statewide DNRC family is the Flathead Basin Commission (FBC).

FBC is a Kalispell-based watershed organization created by the Montana Legislature in 1983 to monitor and protect water quality in the Flathead River drainage. FBC had been administratively attached to the Office of the Governor since its inception. In 2003, the legislature transferred FBC to the DNRC.

The organization functions much like a traditional watershed group, with a broad mix of more than 20 agency and citizen members who meet regularly to design and coordinate ongoing monitoring and watershed restoration projects. By statute, FBC is required to meet only twice a year, but it has traditionally met every other month, rotating meetings among the primary communities in Lake and Flathead Counties to provide better opportunities for public involvement.

Because of the size of the Flathead Basin and its environmental and economic importance, the Commission has a broad-based membership. Six citizen members, appointed by the governor, serve three year terms. Flathead residents Art Vail, Marilyn Wood, Gary Wicks, Paul Smiley, Everit Sliter, and Bruce Tutvedt are the current FBC citizen members. Mr. Wicks is a former DNRC director. Agency members include the superintendent of Glacier National Park; the supervisor of the Flathead National Forest; a councilperson of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes; other representatives of federal,

state, and local land-managing and regulatory agencies; and a representative of the premier of British Columbia. Included are two DNRC employees: Jon Dahlberg, area manager of the Northwestern Land



*Mark Holston*

Office, and Rich Moy, chief of WRD's Water Management Bureau. The current chair is Lake County Representative Dave DeGrandpre of Charlo, who is also head of the Lake County Planning Department.

The commission aggressively seeks funding opportunities and depends upon the receipt of grant funds to carry out its projects, which are designed to improve water quality in Flathead Lake and other water bodies in the drainage. Funding sources have included the 319, Renewable Resource, 104(b)(3), and (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's) Watershed Initiative Programs. FBC has also received

money from nongovernmental sources such as the Bonneville Environmental Foundation. In recent years, FBC has received over \$1 million in grants for watershed restoration, education, monitoring, and other activities.

For instance, FBC's Volunteer Monitoring Program, which has been in existence for 12 years, involves over 50 local citizens who collect water quality information on lakes and streams. The Voluntary Nutrient Reduction Strategy, another FBC program showing a great deal of promise, uses landowner education and low cost, on-the-ground projects to reduce nonpoint source pollution and improve water quality.

FBC's sole staff member is Mark Holston, who has been the public information officer for FBC since 1990 and is located in Kalispell. With a background in journalism, he's also a contributing editor to a number of national and international publications. "Being part of the DNRC family is great," said Mark. "People are going out of their way to assist FBC, and I feel very positive about the long-term benefits of the association."

For more information on Flathead Basin Commission, visit [www.digisys.net/fbc](http://www.digisys.net/fbc) or call 406 752-0081.

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be involved in the project. In addition, the DNRC is working with project stakeholders to seek legislation to secure congressional authorization and funding to prepare a feasibility study on rehabilitation of the system. Once the feasibility study is complete, legislation will be drafted to secure congressional authorization and funding to design and construct the preferred alternative for rehabilitating the system and address environmental requirements and mitigation.

In addition to the huge monetary cost, rehabilitating the St. Mary Facilities would involve complex political and legal considerations. USBR studies indicate that the St. Mary diversion facilities are having a negative impact on

bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), which are listed as a threatened species. Rehabilitation of the system would involve two federal Indian reserved water right compacts. The Fort Belknap Water Rights Compact is predicated on the continued viability of the St. Mary Facilities to deliver water to the Milk River basin. The compact is a delicate negotiated balance of water rights, including the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes' right to essentially all of the natural flow of the Milk River, subject to the claims of the Blackfeet Nation. The St. Mary Facilities are located on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The State and the Blackfeet Tribe are in negotiations for a water rights compact that will include

claims for water from the St. Mary and Milk rivers. The Blackfeet Tribe must be consulted on any rehabilitation of the St. Mary Facilities. Canadian and U.S. differences must be worked out over interpretation of the 1921 International Joint Commission Order on apportioning flows of the St. Mary and Milk rivers.

In the effort to build a broad collaboration Paul Azevedo with DNRC's Water Resources Division has been named state coordinator for the rehabilitation of the St. Mary Facilities. For additional information, contact Paul at the DNRC Water Management Bureau, P.O. Box 201601, Helena MT 59620-1601. phone 406-444-6635, E-mail: [pazevedo@state.mt.us](mailto:pazevedo@state.mt.us).

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